Lawyers rue closure of FTO office

By Our Correspondent

MIANWALI: The closure of the regional office of the Federal Tax Ombudsman (FTO) in Mianwali has shocked the legal fraternity as well as citizens as it has deprived citizens of an essential facility.

In a meeting, the Mianwali Tax Bar Association unanimously rejected the decision. The association was of the opinion that the sudden and mysterious closure of these offices, despite good performance, seemed an attempt to hide the maladministration of the tax department. They said that these offices were opened to provide relief to taxpayers from far flung areas.

It is to be noted that the FTO regional offices in Mianwali, Sargodha, Gujranwala, Abbottabad, Sukkur and Hyderabad became functional in January 2024.

The office at Mianwali had jurisdiction of the Mianwali and Bhakkar districts and they filed complaints of taxpayers for free. As per the records of the Mianwali regional office, they received 255 and 1,188 complaints from Bhakkar and Mianwali districts in 2024 and 2025 respectively, and most of them were decided. At the time of the office's closure on December 31, 2025 only 75 complaints were pending.

The tax bar members said that earlier taxpayers of the districts had to travel to the FTO office in Lahore for the resolution of their tax matter. This, they said, wasted a lot of money and time of taxpayers.

They said that getting pending refunds from the tax department was an uphill battle for taxpayers, but the tax ombudsman office solved their problems and taxpayers got their pending refunds transferred to their accounts on the orders of the FTO.

The tax bar unanimously demanded that the decision be withdrawn and regional offices should continue to operate to provide the fundamental rights to taxpayers.

Meanwhile, the District Bar Association also passed a unanimous resolution against the closure of the FTO regional office and urged the prime minister to take note of the matter.

Urban infrastructure initiative launched

By Our Staff Reporter

LAHORE: Development work under the flagship programme "Maryam Nawaz Ka Sona Punjab" has been formally launched in 51 cities and towns across the province to improve urban infrastructure and basic civic facilities.

Chairing a special meeting, Chief Minister Maryam Nawaz Sharif directed that the first phase of the project be completed by June 2026, with particular focus on sewerage systems and other essential infrastructure in every city. The chief minister has personally assumed direct monitoring of the Punjab Development Plan to ensure transparency, efficiency and timely completion.

To guarantee effective implementation, provincial and district-level control rooms are being established for real-time monitoring of development projects and swift resolution of public issues.

Under the plan, 5,887-km sewerage lines and 181 drainage lines will be constructed, while the production of high-density polyethylene (HDPE) pipes for sewerage is progressing rapidly.

Deputy Commissioners of Multan, Dera Ghazi Khan, Bhakkar, Vehari, Wazirabad, Gujranwala, Sheikhupura and Kasur briefed the chief minister on project progress and city-specific plans.

The chief minister directed immediate improvements in cleanliness and civic management in Sheikhupura, praised the revamping of District Headquarters Hospital Kasur, and instructed further enhancement of sanitation services in Kasur. She also ordered urgent restoration of the sewerage system in Pattoki.

Experts for skill based education

By Our Staff Reporter

LAHORE: The OxfordAQA School Leaders' Summit 2026 brought together school heads, education experts and policymakers in Lahore to debate the shift towards competence-based education and skills-focused assessment on Sunday.

Delivering the keynote on 'The Role of Skills in Assessment', Dr Faisal Bari of LUMS said rapid technological changes, particularly driven by AI, demands a fundamental rethink of teaching and assessment. He stressed that future-ready assessments must focus on skills and knowledge relevant to a fast-evolving world.

In another keynote, Arshad Saeed Husain, Managing Director, Oxford University Press Pakistan, called for moving beyond content-heavy curricula towards developing critical thinking, adaptability and meaningful application of knowledge.

Andrew Coombe, Managing Director, OxfordAQA, highlighted the organisation's commitment to globally benchmarked, real-world assessments rooted in strong local partnerships in Pakistan.

Addressing 'OxfordAQA and AI: Leading with Learning', Dr Alexandra Tomescu underscored the responsible use of artificial intelligence to enhance learning while safeguarding educational integrity.

Kinnaird Society's EmpowerHER festival

LAHORE: Over100 women-led businesses, student ventures, and artisans from across the country were showcased at the Kinnaird College for Women here on Sunday.

The Old Associates of Kinnaird Society (OAKS) organised the EmpowerHER festival.

The festival served as a women-led platform designed to strengthen mentorship, capacity building, networking, and access to markets.

It provided a structured space for women entrepreneurs to showcase their work, connect with mentors, and engage with institutional and policy-level support.

The OAKS said the initiative complemented the Women Entrepreneurship Programme contributing to formalisation, ease of doing business, and improved access to government support mechanisms.

The 2026 edition of the festival embraced the vibrant spirit of Basant, with music, entertainment, and cultural festivities highlighting the resilience, creativity, and innovation of women entrepreneurs. **— Staff Reporter**

Elite capture blamed for country's economic problems

By Khalid Husnain

LAHORE: Federal Minister for Climate Change and Environmental Coordination Musadik Malik has reprimanded the country's elite for benefitting from subsidies instead of prioritising growth.

"First of all, we need to decide about which "growth" we are talking about. Are we talking about your (audience) growth or that of a few seths," he said while speaking at a ThinkFest's session titled Growth, Growth where are you? Why does Pakistan remain poor", moderated by Ms Rubina Athar, former Chairperson of the National Tariff Commission. Lahore University of Management Sciences (LUMS) Vice Chancellor Ali Cheema, Federal Minister of State for Finance Bilal Azhar Kayani and former finance minister Miftah Ismail also spoke on the occasion.

"This is a problem of elite capture, as the growth seems to be for 100 seths only and not for the common person. So, the structural problem is the elite capture and I also come in it," he said, adding that growth being talked about is not for your but for a few people. According to him, 4 billion dollars received under the IMF's programmes benefitted 100 seths in the form of gas, tariff subsidy, export-led growth etc. He said various initiatives of the PML-N government for the common people had generated criticism from the elite.

Speaking on the occasion, Mr Cheema said the country had no growth policy or strategy, as the fiscal crisis was currently very deep.

"The country's investment to GDP ratio is just 15pc — lowest in the region, whereas the lack of growth policy and structural issues have placed the country in a stagnant trajectory," he said. He was of the view that the government would have to work for population control through family planning.

Mr Ismail said that if the government did not go to the IMF, the county would default and be bankrupt. "Our investment to GDP ratio is lowest in South Asia. Our Prime Minister recently talked to the IMF about getting a tax break of Rs1,500 billion that could have been avoided by the government by reducing its expenditures," he lamented.

— Dawn

He said, "PPP wants more provinces in Punjab but not in Sindh, whereas the PML-N wants Hazara as a new province and not any in Punjab. So, it proves that it is not an issue of new provinces but that of monopoly. Moreover, the provinces didn't devolve their functions to local governments under the Provincial Finance Commission (PFC) award."

Govt to direct retailers to provide at least one digital payment option

By Amjad Mahmood

LAHORE: Minister of State for Finance Bilal Azhar Kiyani has said that the federal government will soon direct all retail outlets to at least give one option of digital payment to their customers.

He was speaking at the ThinkFest session on 'Cashless Economy and Inclusion' here on Sunday.

He said that provinces were also being asked to bring a harmonised set of laws in this regard to give an impetus to the cashless economy era. To incentivise the measure, the government had set aside a sum of Rs3.6 billion to subsidize the cost of introducing QR codes, he added.

The minister said that the government was also close to digitising all payments of the Benazir Income Support Programme by June 2026. He said that through the move, around 10 million beneficiaries would be able to draw their money from any microfinance outlet and would not be bound to any specific bank's branch.

Mr Kiyani said that a steering committee, with due representation of the private sector, was working on a cashless economy and clear targets had been set for a 50 percent increase in the banking customers by June 2026. He said that all federal and provincial departments and service providers would only accept digital payments from July 2026.

To highlight the behavioural difference between Pakistanis and other regional nations, State Bank of Pakistan former governor Dr Ishrat Hussain recalled that 18 years ago his cab driver in China stopped for food and paid his bill by scanning a QR code. However, he had to purchase a Rs300,000 air-conditioner from Karachi in cash last year. Four large shops of different known brands he visited refused to accept payment through digital or bank channels to avoid tax officials, he added.

He suggested making all business transactions through formal banking channels or digital wallets mandatory beginning with large shops. He said that so far 90pc digital transactions were being made through easypaisa and jazzcash wallets. He said that people preferred wallets over banking channels perhaps because of the long banking process and cost.

He said Pakistan would have to adopt a cashless economy because the cost of printing currency bills was too high and it could be curtailed only through digital transactions. He suggested that tax authorities should offer rebates on digital transactions.

Referring to e-commerce platforms in the country, Dr Ishrat said that 78pc of the transactions were being made in cash, while in other countries it was a maximum of 30pc.

He lamented that Bangladesh, which was once trailing far behind Pakistan, had surpassed Pakistan by ending poverty only because of the inclusion of the womenfolk into their labour force thanks to the Grameen Bank. He said poor areas, including Balochistan, interior Sindh and south Punjab, were still being ignored in taking various initiatives for eliminating poverty.

Nassir Salim, President and CEO of HBL, talked about the incentives and government support for promoting cashless economy as the policy required technology that was expensive and required huge investment.

Nofel Daud, Chief Digital Officer of the Bank of Punjab, shed light on the hurdles in the existing digital payments and BoP's experiences in handling disbursements to small farmers and women entrepreneurs.

'Absolute democracy with human rights protection does not exist'

LAHORE: Absolute democracy in which human rights are protected does not exist in the world as states across the globe want economic, political and geopolitical stability even at the cost of freedoms, said columnist and writer Nadeem Farooq Paracha on Sunday.

Speaking at a ThinkFest session titled "We, The Mob: Three Populist Uprisings, a book by Mr Paracha", he said: "We are living in a post-ideology era in which states throughout the world are craving for economic, political and geopolitical stability even if they have to detain their people to attain this goal."

He maintained that: "I don't support this development but those against it must have to come up with a worthwhile counter narrative as just sloganeering through social media does not serve any purpose."

He said that democracy itself contained flaws that permitted people like Trump to come into power and they were elected to rule the country only to devour democracy itself. It was difficult to regulate social media but people misuse freedom of speech, he opined.

Explaining the motive behind his latest book, he said that the so-called revolutionaries in the cases of Trump, Lulu (Brazil) and Imran Khan wanted military intervention against their respective failures in elections. In Pakistan's case, former ISI chief Faiz Hameed had told Imran Khan that the military was divided in his (PTI founder's) favour and by escalating this division, the army chief (Gen Asim Munir) could also be removed.

Responding to a query by moderator Maryam Shahid Khan about division in the social fabric and its link with conspiracy theories, Mr Paracha said the main reason behind it was social media as even the US President was talking of conspiracy against him in the elections.

Some sort of fear was the basis of conspiracy theories, he said, adding that the middle class feared that they may be deprived of their privileges and were against the trickle-down effect of these privileges to the masses. "The middle class always desires that the masses remain in their influence," he added.

He said the fight between the PML-N and PTI in Punjab was in fact a duel between two factions of the middle class. Gen Musharraf's constituency of the middle class was claimed by Imran Khan, who, devoid of any worthwhile public support at the time, suddenly staged a big rally in Lahore in 2011 joined by the middle class.

In response to a question by the moderator about the relation of the old and current middle classes with the military, he said that the incumbent military officers were not foreign qualified like in the past and most of them were local-educated and part of the middle class. "One part of this middle class was appeased through the Imran Khan project. When it failed, the other faction of the middle class was facilitated, through the PML-N government," he explained.

He said the armed forces did divide between Imran Khan and Nawaz Sharif, but due to strict military discipline and resultantly failed to overthrow the army chief through the May 9 attacks.

About the role of religion in all three uprisings in his book, Mr Paracha recalled that Zulfikar Ali Bhutto too had raised the slogan of Islamic socialism but it was based on a complete theory. Whereas, the Islamic touch of Imran Khan was very problematic as even its proponents didn't know its meanings, he added. — *AMJAD MAHMOOD*

Shops around Clock Tower sans fire extinguishers

TOBA TEK SINGH: Only 32 shops out of the 270 around Faisalabad's Clock Tower have fire extinguishers installed, revealed District Emergency Officer Engineer Ehtesham Wahla on Sunday.

He said that the findings were gathered through a survey conducted to assess the implementation of the fire safety regulations.

In a press release, he said that instructions had been issued to shop owners with no fire safety equipment, to install fire extinguishers immediately. He warned that it was mandatory to have fire extinguisher cylinders in every shop, school, plaza and office.

He said that strict action would be taken against those who failed to implement the safety rules.

INJURED IN FIRE: Three persons received burn injuries after a fire broke out in a house due to gas leakage in the Santpura locality of Faisalabad on Sunday.

The Jhang Bazar Police said that a gas leakage had accumulated in a kitchen on the fourth storey of the house. They said that when a fire was lit in the kitchen, the roof of the kitchen caved in because of the blast and a fire also broke out in the house.

Police said that three teenagers got trapped in the fire and they received burn injuries. They were shifted to the Allied Hospital's burn unit and were identified as Muhammad Rizwan (17), Muhammad Adnan (15) and Muhammad Zain (16).

Meanwhile, a seven-year-old girl was critically burnt after her clothes caught fire in the kitchen of her house in Pabarwala area on the Sargodha Road in Jhang on Sunday.

Rescue 1122 said that Shakila Arif was sitting near the stove where her clothes suddenly caught fire. As a result, she received serious injuries and was admitted to the Jhang DHQ Hospital. **— Correspondent**

What is media in the contemporary world?

LAHORE: BBC journalist Zeinab Badawi, Nukta editor Amber Rahim Shamsi and Azad Essa of Middle East Eye discussed the changing media landscape across the world.

The session was titled, Does the media serve truth or polarise?' was moderated by Fahd Hussain.

Ms Shamsi said while working at the TV, they were very concerned about ratings and popular things, instead of more nuanced stories. "The same thing is on TV and digital platforms because there is just too much information." She gave the example of the Tirah operation which was not covered by the mainstream media.

Ms Shamsi talked about the advantages of digital platforms compared to the mainstream, saying that they were not sent lines or tickers to run.

"I was on the mainstream media for about four years between 2016 and 2020 and I was constantly told that I can't have this guest on my show and have that guest. It was dictated by the state."

Ms Shamsi said she believed that there was a need to have diverse opinions and original reporting. The original reports might not get as many likes as the mainstream but people are still seeking fresh perspective and investigative reporting.

Ms Badawi termed the world more fragmented.

"Some members of the audience and the public opinion may seek the kind of coverage which enforces their own prejudices but there are others who actually are trying to kind of light on a topic that may be difficult."

She said the mainstream media were constantly seeking different platforms, "for example the BBC Radio is listened to more digitally than it is on the radio and that's the direction of travel. The old business model for the mainstream has been busted. The dependent channels that sought advertising as revenue, advertisers now can now go to Google and YouTube."

The BBC journalist said the current landscape was much more than the digital versus mainstream media and the line between them was becoming more blurred. I think the dust is settling, it's not quite clear where it is going but we do know the old model of TV news is finished, she declared.

— Dawn

Speaking of the definition of journalism, Azad Essa said that "we assumed that journalism was one particular thing before this moment. It was always a contested thing but the level of dissemination of information that we have today has created a crisis where we think what journalism is and what journalism is not".

He said we had to consider different forms of journalism that existed for example, non-profit investigation in the US and the UK and other countries. "In the same way in the past we had newspapers but not everybody was reading the newspaper. The people were going to town squares to get the news."

Social media also plays that role and there are always streams of journalism but people consume what they want to consume, he said.

To the question whether it was possible in Pakistan to do journalism if one is not serving A, B, C, Ms Shamsi said probably not. She said the content creators and online commentators were also relying on the information gathered and processed by the journalists. — *IRFAN ASLAM*